

SPORTS AND ECONOMICS

Bringing IN THE Gold

The U.S. OLYMPIC Committee adds MONEY, JOBS and PRESTIGE to Colorado SPRINGS

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Numbers don't really do it. In order to understand the U.S. Olympic Committee's economic impact on El Paso County — \$365 million a year plus \$35 million from sports marketing — you have to spend a little time by the front desk at 1 Olympic Plaza.

It is at the USOC Training Center, at Boulder Street and Union Boulevard, that the scope of the operation becomes clear, not with dollars but with the constantly changing sea of faces.

This is the front line, where USOC employees work 363 days each year to make sure the 10,000 athletes, coaches and officials who come to the training center in groups small and large have what they need to maintain world-class Olympic programs from boxing to figure skating.

“The Dave Schultz wrestling tournament brought in 400 people recently, the U.S. boxing tournament another 300,” said Maureen Whidden, assistant manager of operations. “And all of that was on top of our resident athletes and our camp populations. The logistical planning starts a year out. Every department has to be involved to get us to the point where we have organized chaos.”

There are 700 programs each year in Colorado Springs, says Olympic Training Center managing director Mike English. About 70 percent of the participants are members of Olympic, National, Junior National, Development and Coaching programs with the USOC making sure the nation's top athletes have priority and get sufficient training time.

There are about 150 resident athletes, and the rest stay for a weekend to three weeks at a time.

The USOC operates with a budget of more than \$100 million. It employs 500 here, and with 21 of the National Governing Bodies in town, the number of Olympic-related jobs is about 1,020. The governing bodies administer, develop programs and select national team participants for individual Olympic sports.

“Besides the economic benefits, having the USOC and the governing bodies here is extremely important to our community brand, to be identified as a center for world-class athletes,” said Mike Kazmierski, president and chief executive of the Greater Colorado Springs Economic Development Corp. “We are recognized as the place where our top-tier athletes come to prepare for the Olympics, and it gives us a lot of media visibility.”

That visibility contributes to the 100,000 tourists the Olympic center averages a year, about 80 percent of whom are from out of town. The tours are free, although visitors typically leave small contributions to the USOC and much larger outlays at the Olympic

Shop (formerly Spirit Store) for apparel and souvenirs.

The store, now run by XP Apparel of Denver, generates the most revenue of the seven stores nationwide licensed to sell Olympic goods, with direct sales here averaging \$1.5 million a year.

But, ultimately, understanding the USOC's economic benefits comes back to the front desk of the Athlete Center.

It is from here that visiting athletes, coaches and trainers get housing, training information, access to computers, mail, phone service, help finding lost luggage, meal privileges — about 390,000 meals are served a year — and transportation.

There are 58 vehicles bearing the five Olympic rings and the USOC logo — sport utility vehicles, vans, buses and trucks — with eight devoted to making airport pickups and two more 32-passenger buses coming this week.

“Traffic can vary from a couple of people per day to the 250 or so judo players we had in one day for the recent Pan American Junior Championships,” English said. “We’re not a hotel, but we do have staff up front to make sure we provide service for the participants at a worldclass level.”

With 491 beds available on its site, the USOC often can provide housing for all resident and visiting athletes, but there are plenty of options nearby if it cannot.

Because the Hilton Hotels chain is a U.S. Olympic Committee partner, the Hilton Antlers Hotel downtown and the Doubletree Hilton, south of downtown, benefit the most: Each receives about \$250,000 in Olympic-related business per year, said Patricia Snowden, Hilton's regional director for sales and marketing.

For other hotels it depends on prior connections and the individual choice of delegations.

“We get weight-lifting and gymnastics athletes from a group standpoint and then some individual visitors,” said Richard Wall, the Clarion Hotel manager. “To throw a dart at it, I’d say that in lodging alone what we see in direct sales is about \$36,000 with close to a thousand guests a year from the USOC.”

There are other direct business connections with regional firms to handle laundry (Snow-White Linen), lawn care and snow removal (CoCal Landscape Services), air conditioning (York International Corp.), and food supply (United Restaurant Supply), Oroweat Bakeries, Sinton Dairy, Sysco Denver, Coca-Cola Bottling, Maverick Meats).

About half the 150 resident athletes work or attend school in El Paso County, contributing to the economy with their labor, living expenses and tuition.

And then there is the often overlooked aspect of athletes who come to train and end up staying. Three-time Olympic racewalker Carl Schuler came to Colorado Springs in 1983, fresh from receiving his master's degree in regional planning from the University of Michigan, and still is here 23 years later. He now is an administrator with the El Paso County planning department.

“Of the dozen or so male racewalkers who came to camp here in 1982-84, three of us are still here,” Schuler said. “That’s not counting others who came later and stayed for a substantial number of years or my wife (Debby Van Orden), who also came here as racewalker and stayed.”

“If you look at other sports you’ll find the same thing. A majority of the athletes who come here to train cycle through and leave. But a lot of us stay on and become part of the community.”

Because the Olympic center and the National Governing Bodies are strong contributors to the local economy, other communities constantly try to woo them away.

Kazmierski says the EDC works closely with the Olympic National Governing Bodies to ensure they can meet their goals here, and his group aims to stay ahead of the threat by helping the USOC expand its holdings in the area.

To that end, the EDC and others are working on a plan to provide the governing bodies central office space on a 20-acre parcel on North Nevada Avenue, north of Garden of the Gods Road. There is even some thought to bringing more NGBs to town.

“We won’t actively recruit any organizations, because we don’t like it when it happens to us,” Kazmierski said. “But we would like to see that number grow, and we’ll listen to anybody who is interested.”

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